

0.Black Catholic History Month

by Deacon Joseph Connor

Why is there a Black Catholic History Month? And, is there a need for Black catholic History Month?

The answers are quite credible. One the factual history of Black Catholics has been left out of the History of the Catholic Church. Also, during Black Catholic History Month opportunities to recognize and evangelize are made public through acknowledging contributions by black people to the Catholic church.

Consider the contribution of St. Augustine who was born at Tagaste, Africa, and died in Hippo, converted by St. Ambrose. He was ordained a priest and was made bishop of Hippo at the age of 41 and became a great luminary of the African Church, one of the four great founders of religious orders, and a Doctor of the Universal Church. ([Catholic Culture.org](http://CatholicCulture.org))

Some people forget that Christianity did not originate in Europe and even express surprised when they learn that Black Catholic History began in the Acts of the Apostles (8: 26-40) with the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch by Philip the Deacon. This text is important for several reasons. First, it chronicles the conversion of the first Black African in recorded Christian history. Second, the text suggests that the man was a wealthy, literate, and powerful emissary of the Nubian Queen and also a faithful, practicing Jew prior to his baptism. Clearly, he was not an ignorant heathen. Third, the Ethiopian Eunuch's conversion predates the conversions of Saints Paul and Cornelius. Most significantly, many cite this conversion as the very moment when the church changed from a Hebrew and Hellenist community to the truly Universal and Catholic Church. ([The National Black Catholic Congress.www.nbccongress.org](http://TheNationalBlackCatholicCongress.www.nbccongress.org))

Black Catholics trace their faith history back to Christian antiquity long before other nations heard the "Good News." Christian Africa was indeed a "leading light" in early Christendom. Black Catholics point to three popes who were born in Africa: Saints Victor I, Melchiades, and Gelasius

I. All three shepherded the early church through tough and tumultuous times in history. Black Catholics claim many Black Saints like Saints Cyprian, Zeno, Anthony of Egypt, Moses the Black, Pachomius, Maurice, Athanasius, Pistentius, Mary of Egypt, Cyril of Alexandria, Monica of Hippo, Augustine of Hippo, Perpetua, Felicitas, and Thecla. Some of these mystics, monastics, and martyrs literally made the church what it is today. ([The National Black Catholic Congress. www.nbccongress.org](http://www.nbccongress.org))

Therefore, Black Catholics have always been a part of the Catholic Church. But very, very few facts have been taught or written in history of the Catholic Church. Comments in historical documents define blacks as illiterate, and less than, leading to the fact that black Catholics have been rejected and denied their rightful place in the Catholic Churches of America for centuries. This has called for many courageous black people over time to challenge and play pivotal roles within the catholic church to raise the awareness that we are children of God. Made in his image people like Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange, Daniel Rudd and Venerable Augustus Tolton have challenged the church's perception of black Catholic folk. They witnessed their faith by ministering to their people, and left lasting legacies in the face of prejudice, ignorance, and indifference.

This battle has continued through centuries. One that I personally experienced during my formation in the diaconate class of 2003, was when the N word was used by a professor to critic one of my papers. After discussing the matter at the Archdiocese, the only solution offered was to sit out his class, which I did not accept. So, I know firsthand that it is still necessary to address racism, ignorance, indifference and focus intentionally on the history of black Catholics as it unfolds in the Catholic Church.

The establishment of the National Black Catholic Lay Caucus by Danial Rudd and the Colored Congress in 1889, National Black Lay Caucus 1970, National Office of Black Catholics in 1970, and the National Black Catholic Congress in 1987 to the present, have documented the historical timeline of the contributions of black Catholics to the church. The movement by these organizations have brought to light racism and

discrimination against blacks which has deprived blacks of being authentically black and authentically Catholic (Sister Thea Bowman) and excluded their contributions to the Catholic church.

In the Archdiocese of Seattle, Walter Hubbard, with the approval of Archbishop Hunthausen, founded the Seattle branch of the Catholic Interracial Council in 1964-1969. In the early 70's, the Office of Black Catholic was reconvened. Over the next 20 years, under the administration of the archdiocese, the title and administrators changed several times.

Today, members of the Black Catholic Advisory Circle of the Archdioceses of Seattle (BCAC) continue the effort to affirm our gifts and contributions to the universal Catholic church and the church of Western Washington. We create opportunities to share our gifts, tell our stories, develop lay leadership, and develop outreach events to promote social justice. We work in partnership with Seattle University Campus Ministry, the Institute for Catholic Thought and Culture, and the Seattle Archdiocese Office of Multicultural Ministry, and we collaborate with the South Seattle Racial Solidarity team, the North Seattle Racial justice team, and Intercommunity Peace and Justice Center.

Through our efforts we have hosted or participated in events that address evangelization, catechesis, and social justice; we have provided the Archdioceses a Pastoral Plan of Action for the Evangelization and Pastoral care of Blacks in this Archdioceses with the hopes that it will inspire our Archdiocese to bear witness to the world that we are a true community of faith.

Seventy-eight years as a Catholic, I am encouraged by the six African American Catholics who are currently on the road to officially being recognized as saints in the Catholic Church. Their stories offer us glimpses of holiness, courage, resilience, creativity, and joy in the face of grave injustice.

For more information, participation and updates on events visit www.nbccongress and bcacseattle.org.

